

HIV/AIDS PROJECT



Implemented by the World Health Organization (WHO)

MYA/96/003

AIDS and the virus that causes it, HIV, are spreading rapidly in Myanmar. Lying at the crossroads of East, South and Southeast Asia, Myanmar shares borders with two countries with the largest numbers of AIDS patients in Asia (India and Thailand), and with two others with large populations (China and Bangladesh). People are moving across these borders in growing numbers. Many are involved in commercial sex, are poor, have little education, and face difficult work and living conditions—so are particularly vulnerable to infection with the deadly virus.

WHO estimates that by year the year 2000, more people will become infected by HIV each year in Asia than in the whole of the rest of the world. In Myanmar, some 500,000 people are thought to have already contracted the virus. By the end of 1996, nearly 15,000 people had been confirmed as HIV-positive, and over 1700 cases of AIDS had been reported. These numbers are expected to increase rapidly.

In Myanmar, HIV is most commonly transmitted through multiple sexual partners (mostly through heterosexual rather than homosexual intercourse) and intravenous drug use. Of male AIDS sufferers, 49% became infected by using contaminated needles, and 39% through sexual transmission involving multiple sex partners. Of women, 44% are believed to have contracted the disease through prostitution or having multiple sex partners; a further 38% are partners of people in high-risk groups (such as drug users and customers of prostitutes). Surveys show that more than 20% of prostitutes are infected with HIV, as are over 60% of intravenous drug users.

HIV infection is highest along the Thai and Indian borders, in opium-growing areas, and among mobile workers such as traders, transport workers, miners, soldiers and fishermen. Young women from rural areas are attracted to trading and mining towns in the hope of improving their living standards; all too often, they turn to prostitution and so contract the virus. When prostitutes and their clients return to their home villages, they bring the virus with them, along with tuberculosis that often accompanies AIDS; the diseases can then spread into otherwise "low risk" rural populations.

The challenge of combating AIDS is made all the more difficult because sex is a taboo subject in most cultures, and many of the behaviours that transmit the disease (prostitution, homosexual sex and intravenous drug use) are culturally discouraged or illegal. The groups most at risk are hard to reach by conventional means because they are poor, socially marginalized and mobile.

AIDS has a double impact on families: they lose the income earned by the patients, who are often in their 20s and 30s—the most productive years of life—and are often their family's principal breadwinners. And families may spend 25–30% of their remaining income to care for the patient. They may be forced to sell land and other assets to cover debts, further impoverishing the survivors.

The HDIE HIV/AIDS project

Enhancing Capacity for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care is one of 10 projects under the United Nations Development Programme's multisectoral Human Development Initiative Extension (HDIE) programme. It aims to prevent further spread of HIV and help those affected by AIDS deal with the economic, social and health challenges caused by the disease.

HIV and AIDS is too important and urgent a problem to be ignored. As an integral part of the national AIDS programme and the United Nations systems other HIV/AIDS initiatives in Myanmar, the project coordinates closely with the national government, local and international nongovernment organizations, research agencies and affected communities and individuals.

The HIV/AIDS project also works closely with the other nine HDIE projects, which promote rural development in fields such as health, education and agriculture in 23 of the poorest townships in Myanmar. The HIV/AIDS project trains other HDIE project staff about the disease, and provides them with condoms and information materials for distribution to people in the villages they serve.

Project activities

The HIV/AIDS project includes six types of activities:

- Training.
- NGO initiatives.
- Community AIDS support volunteers.
- Multisectoral involvement and resource mobilization.
- Communication materials.
- Research.

Training

The project conducts training programmes for paramedics, midwives and nurses in HIV prevention, AIDS treatment and patient counselling. It trains laboratory technicians in how to detect HIV, and NGO staff and development workers in how to communicate HIV-prevention messages effectively to rural people.

NGO initiatives

Many of the local and international NGOs active in Myanmar focus on combating HIV and AIDS. They run strong education and prevention programmes in the cities and in border areas. The project supports their efforts through training, promoting information exchange and coordination.

Community volunteers

Myanmar lacks the facilities to be able to treat all AIDS patients in hospital. The project runs a support volunteer programme in selected border villages in eastern Shan State. These volunteers help care for AIDS patients in their own homes and communities, reducing demands on the formal health service and helping overcome taboos and misconceptions among the community about the disease.

Multisectoral involvement and resource mobilization

Education is key to preventing the further spread of AIDS. The project stimulates government agencies and businesses to educate their staff about the disease and how to prevent it. The business community has responded favourably, and has provided financial assistance to the national AIDS programme for various education campaigns. The project also shares information and strategies with organizations in neighbouring countries such as Thailand and China that are attempting to stop the spread of the disease.

Communication materials

Education relies on communication materials to be effective. The project develops posters, stickers, flip charts and other media to promote AIDS awareness and prevention, and distributes these to NGOs and community groups for use in villages, health centres and public places.

Research

There is a scarcity of reliable research on HIV and AIDS in Myanmar. To help fill this gap, the project sponsors studies on the social, behavioural, economic and biomedical aspects of HIV infection, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The data have been helpful in prioritizing target populations and designing appropriate intervention programmes.